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ABSTRACT

The Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLPR) is a scale that describes how second language proficiency develops on a scale from zero to native-like proficiency, providing performance descriptions in terms of practical tasks. Initially developed for English second language teaching, it has been adapted for English dialects in Australia, a number of other languages (French, Italian, Japanese, Chinese, Indonesian, Korean), and English for academic and special purposes. Two scales of language teacher proficiency have also been created. A variety of self-assessment versions for both testing learner and teacher proficiency are under development, and one project is adapting the scale to sign language. Re-evaluation and revision of the basic scale are ongoing. The ASLPR has become the standard means for stating language proficiency in Australia, with rater training programs designed to ensure test reliability. Research is under way to document the language learning process and the time needed for attainment of different proficiency levels. A number of testing projects in other countries have used the scale as a model, and international usage is increasing. (MSE)

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The Minister, the Hon. Mr. Bob Quinn, the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Roy Webb, ladies and gentlemen, as co-author with Elaine of the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings and as Director of the Centre for Applied Linguistics and Languages and the NLLIA Language Testing and Curriculum Centre, I am pleased to join with Elaine in welcoming you to this official launch of various products associated with the ASLPR and the NLLIA ESL Bandscales.

Elaine and I commenced development of what became the ASLPR in 1978, first releasing it at a seminar in early 1979. The first idea for the scale came to me as a result of the work I had been involved in through the 1970s with the then Foreign Languages Advisory Committee of the Queensland Board of Secondary School Studies and my Ph.D. research from 1975 to 1978 into the teaching of languages at tertiary level. It became very obvious to me at that time that we lacked the ability to state in practical terms the skills that learners of a second or foreign language had: we could say that they scored an A in an examination or got 65% but such results meant nothing to students or anyone else in terms of what they could actually do in the language. Then, in 1978, the opportunity came when I was appointed the academic adviser on the adult migrant education program to develop something that would, first, give guidance to syllabus writers interested in developing the practical language skills of migrants requiring English to be able to cope with the sort of life they wanted in Australia and, second, provide an instrument against which the learner's growing language skills could be measured. At the same time, I was interested in whether the instrument could be developed in such a way that it would be of value to the maintenance and development of Queensland Secondary School language syllabuses that wanted to go beyond traditional formal teaching to provide programs and approaches to assessment that were relevant to the practical language skills that most language learners expect they will develop.

The outcome of these issues was, eventually, the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings. The ASLPR is a scale that essentially describes how a second or foreign language develops from zero to native-like proficiency. It provides performance descriptions couched in terms of the practical tasks that learners can carry out and how they carry them out at nine points along the continuum from zero to native-like proficiency (and with another three undescribed points available for use). The scale is presented in three columns. The first is a general description that is almost identical from version to version since, no matter the language, the broad developmental path is similar and the levels identify the same ability and developmental stage across languages irrespective of the time taken to achieve it; the second column provides examples of specific language tasks and of how they are

carried out; while the third is a comment column that defines terms or briefly explains concepts.

Though they ASLPR was initially developed in the context of the teaching and learning of English as a second language in Australia, from the outset it was also considered and formally and informally trialled for and used with other languages, and overseas (e.g., in China, Singapore, Brunei, the Cocos Islands and the United States). It has been adopted very widely in Australia, used with many different languages, applied in many different learning situations, and even used (though more quesstionably since it has never been formally trialled in this context) for proficiency assessment with such other dialects as Aboriginal English and Standard English as a Second Dialect amongst Aboriginal learners. It has also had a profound effect on other scales used for language proficiency assessment in other parts of the world. The *ACTFL Guidelines* developed under the auspices of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages has, for example, drawn very heavily on one of the early versions of the ASLPR.

Since 1978, Elaine and I have spent a great deal of our research effort in work on the ASLPR. Though the general version is usable with any language, foreign language versions have been, or are being, produced for French, Italian, Japanese, Chinese, Indonesian, and Korean. The principles of direct proficiency assessment and proficiency scales have been applied to the measurement of proficiency in languages used for specified purposes and so there are specific purpose exemplar versions for ESL in Business, Engineering, and English for Academic Purposes. There is also a generic version for stating the proficiency of language teachers and one for stating the proficiency of teachers of Indonesian.

Of particular interest worldwide is the work that we have done in the development of self-assessment versions of particular value for such things as guiding learners in self-access programs and large scale surveys of language proficiency whether in the community at large or in particular professions such as teaching. Thus there is a range of self-assessment versions that include very simple self-assessment scales used in a telephone survey of language resources in the community, computer-based self-assessment versions accessible in English and Portuguese, and other versions ranging up to a more complex one used in surveys of language teacher proficiency in Queensland schools and a student self-assessment version in Chinese. Self-assessment is one of the more exciting areas of development with, in addition to a variety of validation studies, some large scale plans currently under development. involving the use of various forms of self-assessment.

A somewhat different development but one of great interest to us has been the application of the ASLPR by Des Power and Breda Carty to the assessment of proficiency in signed languages including Auslan.

This on-going development work has always led us to re-evaluate the basic scale, the assumptions underlying the ASLPR, and the ways in which proficiency levels are described in the different types of scales. Formal evaluations and extensive usage have allowed us to assess the validity of the descriptors and the reliability of the assessment procedures and, therefore, of the descriptors and their differentiations.

Since 1978, several new editions of the scale have been produced but the new general purpose version launched today has been more substantially revised than any of the previous editions both in the descriptors themselves and in the names given to the levels. Rather than being the product of a Friday afternoon's soliloquising back in 1978 (which it never was, though sometimes we have thought some individuals believed that to have been its origin), the ASLPR as it is today is the product of 17 years of continual formal and informal trialling, feedback from use in the field, and, through the many versions, the continual and intensive re-examination of the descriptors.

The ASLPR has become the standard means for the statement of proficiency in Australia. It is used in many different contexts ranging from educational contexts and the interpretation of test results to immigrant regulations, law courts, libraries, vocational requirements for teaching and many other vocations, and so on. One of the fundamental uses is in relation to language policy and language-in-education planning. In these days when, rightly, there are very large sums of money devoted to language education, it is startling to realise that language policies aim at developing language skills without having available any useful or reliable information on how long it takes learners of different ages, in different sorts of programs, to acquire different levels of proficiency - and therefore how much money it is necessary to allocate in order to achieve the desired outcomes.. We are trying to rectify this deficiency in a large project in the NLLIA Language Testing and Curriculum Centre that aims at developing a substantial database of information on learners, their personal and course characteristics, and their entry and exit proficiencies. Initially the project is based on English as a second language, Italian and Japanese but we would like to see it extended over time to all the priority languages learned in Australia and eventually to other languages. In this way, we aim to provide more reliable information on how long it takes learners to develop particular proficiency levels in specified circumstances. Such information will be invaluable for, for example, language policy-making purposes and assessments of the effectiveness of language teaching programs.

We are also conscious of the importance of quality control in language assessment, especially in the form of assessment that is most commonly associated with the ASLPR, viz., so-called direct or adaptive proficiency assessment, which is sometimes (though, in a properly controlled situation, wrongly) said to have an excessive subjective component. We address this issue through the range of ASLPR training programs that we offer but we are also developing a new monitoring system which, based on a register of ASLPR assessors and their ratings, will allow us to accumulate data on the different centres using the ASLPR for proficiency assessment purposes, the assessors that carry out the assessment, and, using advanced statistical procedures, the reliability of their assessments. This monitoring system will, we believe, be of great benefit to assessors and their institutions since it will enable them to assure their clients of the reliability of the ratings that they provide and the competence of their assessors.

The ASLPR has, we believe, made a substantial contribution to language education and applied linguistics in Australia. It has, for some 17 years, been at the forefront of scale-based language proficiency assessment in Australia, if not the world, and the recent developments in the areas of specific purpose assessment, vocational

competency specifications for teachers, and quality control ensure that it will remain there. It has also contributed significantly to the international reputation of Griffith University in this area of applied linguistics and has enabled the University through the Centre for Applied Linguistics and Languages to achieve leading roles in such other internationally significant approaches to language testing as the Australian government's ACCESS test of English skills of applicants for migration to Australia and the International English Language Testing system (IELTS), the joint Australian-British test of English for overseas students.

From the outset, the significance and usage of the ASLPR has extended well beyond Australia and major projects are in train that will considerably increase its international significance and usage. For this reason and to facilitate its wider adoption, Elaine and I are considering whether, over the next development phase, the name of the scale might not be amended to better reflect its international status and its appropriateness beyond Australia, in which case its name might become the International Second Language Proficiency Ratings or ISLPR.

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